

The Golden Mean of Roberto Assagioli

An interview conducted with Roberto Assagioli by Sam Keen*

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Image of the Florence Cathedral (public domain)

Introductory note: Psychiatrist [Roberto Assagioli](#) (see below) explored several concepts associated with what is now called "cognitive behavioral therapy" (CBT). See this [overview of CBT](#) from the Mayo Clinic. Core principles of CBT can be seen in other philosophical and religious traditions (e.g. Buddhism, Stoicism, and Christianity). Assagioli's life experience includes being imprisoned by Mussolini's fascist government in 1940 for "praying for peace and inviting others to join him--along with other international crimes."

An Invisible Glory

The Renaissance oozes from every inch of Florence that is not covered by Fiats and tourists . . . Assagioli's office is a small room in his apartment, which is above the headquarters of the Institute. Books line two of the walls: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Herman Keyserling, Abraham Maslow and Carl Gustav Jung seem to be favorites . . . The desk is antique and covered with objects and papers (talismans of the shaman), fresh cut flowers . . . ; a barometer; a clock; a kitchen timer; scales; a flag of the United Nations; a star globe; two word-cards—ENERGY and GOOD-WILL. The walls, once white, have now yellowed like old bones. A stuffed Victorian love seat squats in one corner of the room.



Assagioli rises to greet me. He is old, fine-boned and frail, but the liveliness and delight in his face make his presence vigorous. His pointed goatee and salmon-colored-velvet smoking jacket lend an air of old-world authority.



Roberto Assagioli: I must ask you to write the questions that you would like to ask me because, as you know, I do not hear.

Sam Keen: (This is going to be a strange conversation. I will have to carry on two separate dialogues: one with the tape recorder and one with Assagioli. In order to keep track of his answers I will have to read my written questions onto the tape. I will also have to record my elaborations, meta questions, doubts and occasional voices. It will be hard to capture nuances because he can only respond to specific questions. But, then, most people are deaf to the metaconversation, the thoughts beyond the words. There are four parties to every dialogue. Two are silent.)

Keen: What was your relationship to Freud and Jung?

Assagioli: I never met Freud personally but I corresponded with him and he wrote to Jung expressing the hope that I would further the cause of psychoanalysis in Italy. But I soon became a heretic. With Jung, I had a more cordial relationship. We met many times during the years and had delightful talks. Of all modern psychotherapists, Jung is the closest to [my practice of] psychosynthesis.

Keen: What are the similarities and differences?

Assagioli: In the practice of therapy we both agree in rejecting "pathologism" that is, concentration upon morbid manifestations and symptoms of a supposed psychological "disease." We regard man as a fundamentally, healthy organism in which there may be a temporary malfunctioning. Nature is always trying to re-establish harmony, and within the psyche the principle of synthesis is dominant. Irreconcilable opposites do not exist. The task of therapy is to aid the individual in transforming the personality, and integrating apparent contradictions. Both Jung and myself have stressed the need for a person to develop the higher psychic functions, the spiritual dimension . . .

I believe the will is the Cinderella of modern psychology. It has been relegated to the kitchen. The Victorian notion that will power could overcome all obstacles was destroyed by Freud's discovery of unconscious motivation. But, unfortunately, this led modern psychology into a deterministic view of man as a bundle of competing forces with no center. This is contrary to every human being's direct experience of himself.

At some point, perhaps in a crisis when danger threatens, an awakening occurs in which the individual discovers his will. This revelation that the self and the will are intimately connected can change a person's whole awareness of himself and the world. He sees that he is a living subject, an actor, endowed with the power to choose, to relate, to bring about changes in his own personality, in others, in circumstances. And this awareness leads to a feeling of wholeness, security and joy. Because modern psychology has neglected the centrality of will, it has denied that we have a direct experience of the self. With the certainty that one has a will comes the realization of the intimate connection between the will and the self. This is the existential experience of the direct awareness of pure self-consciousness. It is self-consciousness that sets man apart from animals.

Human beings are aware but also know that they are aware. We can express the importance of self consciousness, the unity of willing and being, by saying (as opposed to Descartes): "I am aware of being and willing," or "I am a willing self."

Keen: (My God, he is trying to make us responsible for our identity!)

Assagioli: I think most discussions about identity have gone wrong because academic psychologists don't take the trouble to experiment in appropriate ways. They run rats through mazes but they don't go into the inward laboratory and examine their own experience of the will. They might be compared, with some irreverence, to those theologians who refused to look through Galileo's telescope because they were afraid of disturbing their world view. They neglect introspection, which is the best laboratory a psychologist has.

Keen: Can you describe will further?

Assagioli: No. It is indescribable. It is a matter of direct experience, just like the direct experience of red or blue. Can you tell me what it is like to experience blue?

Keen: But that assumes there is a single will, a single directing force. From the time of St. Paul to Freud the experience of the split will has bedeviled mankind. "The good I will I do not" and the will to life is in opposition to the will to death. How do you unify the conflicting wills?

Assagioli: It is certainly true—that there is a multiplicity within the self but the will is essentially the activity of the self which stands above the multiplicity. It directs, regulates and balances the other functions of the personality in a creative way. I don't believe there is any fundamental split, any irreconcilable conflict, within man. I don't think there is a will to death opposing the will to life. What is loosely called the "split will" can be recognized to be in reality the conflict between the central will and a multitude of drives, urges, desires and wishes. This is a universal experience. Conflicts are present in every normal individual. Without them there would be no need for psychoanalysis or psychosynthesis! Each choice involves some conflict whether to stay inside and read or go out for a walk—you can't do them both at once. In neurotic conflict there is a desperate attempt to have two incompatible things at the same time. But in the normal person the will can function to lessen or to eliminate the conflict by recognizing a hierarchy of needs and arranging for an appropriate satisfaction of all needs. The central will distributes the tasks to other parts of the personality. Let me use an analogy that is central to my thinking: The will is like the conductor of an orchestra. He is not self-assertive but is rather the humble servant of the composer and of the score.

Keen: How does psychosynthesis train people to create this Olympian attitude of detached powerfulness?

Assagioli: Techniques are always related to the individual situation, so it is hard to generalize. But I can discuss two basic techniques: disidentification and training of the will.

I can begin with a fundamental psychological principle: We are dominated by everything with which our self is identified. We can dominate and control everything from which we disidentify ourselves. The normal mistake we all make is to identify ourselves with some content of consciousness rather than with consciousness itself.

Some people get their identity from their feelings, others from their thoughts, others from their social roles. But this identification with a part of the personality destroys the freedom which comes from the experience of the pure "I."

Keen: We identify with the predicate rather than the subject.

Assagioli: That is right. Often a crisis in life deprives a person of the function or role with which he has identified: an athlete's body is maimed, a lover's beloved departs with a wandering poet; a dedicated worker must retire. Then the process of disidentification is forced on one and a solution can only come by a process of death and rebirth in which the person enters into a broader identity. But this process can occur with conscious cooperation.

The exercise in disidentification and identification involves practicing awareness and affirming: *I have a body, but I am not my body. I have emotions, but I am not my emotions. I have a job, but I am not my job... etc.* Systematic introspection can help to eliminate all partial self-identifications.

Keen: This technique is similar to the Buddhist vipassana meditation in which one merely

observes passing thoughts, sensations and images.

Assagioli: Yes, and it leads to the affirmation that the observer is different from what he observes. So the natural stage which comes after disidentification is a new identification of the self: I recognize and affirm that "I am a center of pure self-consciousness. I am a center of will, capable of ruling, directing and using all my psychological processes and my physical body." The goal of these exercises is to learn to disidentify at any time of the day, to disassociate the self from any overpowering emotion, person, thought or role and assume the vantage point of the detached observer.

Keen: I see how you arrive at the pure experience of the self as observer, but how can you claim that the will is capable of ruling and directing all the other psychological functions? Frequently the will seems powerless to master infantile drives. At times it is a powerless prisoner governed by an infantile tyrant. When depression strikes, or anger surges, or sexual desire bubbles up, will power seems weak, more like an aging parent than a virile manager of the personality.

Assagioli: Will, like any other function of the personality, can be systematically developed and strengthened. If it is weak it can be trained by regular exercise in the same way muscles are developed by gymnastics. And if a person begins with a weak will he may, by the simple miracle of overcompensation, develop a greater than normal strength of will. Everybody has enough will to begin the process of developing more.

Keen: What other techniques do you use to develop will power?

Assagioli: Let me clarify something. Psychosynthesis is not primarily concerned with developing will power. Strength is a necessary but not a sufficient condition of the will. **It is equally important to develop a skillful will and a good will.**

We have many techniques for developing each of these qualities. I deal with these at length in *The Act of Will*. One technique is visualizing the "ideal model." Picture as vividly as possible how your life would be different if you were in possession of a strong will. Visualize yourself as having attained inner and outer mastery . . .

Developing a skillful will is more difficult. If the will is placed in direct opposition to strong feelings or drives it will be overpowered and so we have to create a strategy to achieve the ends we will. Take, for example, a person with an obsessive desire who wills to be rid of his obsession. The more he concentrates on the obsession, the fiercer it grows. But he can withhold his attention and substitute a new interest, he can cultivate a beneficent "obsession." Holding new images before the eyes tends to produce the reality suggested by the image. This follows from a well-known psychological law: Images or mental pictures and ideas tend to produce the physical conditions and external acts that correspond to them. Or as William James said: "Every image has in itself a motor element."

One very simple technique I use is a series of cards on which are printed evocative words such as: **CALM, PATIENCE, BLISS, ENERGY, GOOD-WILL.** When these cards are placed around the room they trigger attitudes and call forth the quality they symbolize. I also use works of art in a similar way. For instance Fra Angelico's *Transfiguration* is a visible symbol for the transformation of the personality which takes place when a person gets in touch with the transpersonal Self.

Keen: (Is this simpleminded, or a judicious use of the automatic responses of the body/mind? I am not certain. Confession: One evening I put up the card named GLORY in my hotel room and waited for results. In the morning I awoke in ruffled and musty sheets to streaming sunlight and church bells and a golden day filled with florentine coffee, Leonardo da Vinci, and—most certainly—glory. But we all know such attitudinal overlays are due to the power of suggestion, don't we?)

Keen: Goodwill seems to belong more to religion than psychotherapy. Can't the will be healthy

without being good?

Assagioli: No. A person is always in a social context; he is not an isolated unit. So the more conflict there is, the more energy is wasted. If we are to have any deep peace it depends upon the harmonization of wills. Self centeredness is deeply destructive to the cooperation without which a person cannot live a full life in community. Why should we consider good will an expendable virtue, a matter only for the religious? I can go even a step further. This same principle applies to an individual's relation to nature and the universe. No person can take an arrogant stand and consider himself unrelated to the universe.

Like it or not, man is a part of the universal will and he must somehow tune in and willingly participate in the rhythms of universal life. The harmonization and unification of the individual and the universal will—the Chinese identification with the Tao, the Stoic acceptance of destiny, or the Christian will of God—is one of the highest human goals, even if it is seldom realized.

Keen: Until Maslow began to talk about metaneeds, psychology was embarrassed by anything that looked like metaphysics or religion. Now it seems that mysticism and medicine are joining forces. Does healthy self awareness necessarily involve a religious commitment?

Assagioli: Not necessarily. What I call personal psychosynthesis can be achieved by coming to understand the lower and the middle unconscious. But for some people, when basic psychological needs have been met and a measure of health has been achieved, boredom and a sense of meaninglessness set in and a search begins for some higher purpose in life. As Jung pointed out, being normal and adjusted is enough for some persons but others have a hunger for transcendence. There is a new "fourth force" in psychology—transpersonal psychology—which seeks to explore those needs and aspirations that go beyond self-actualization and humanistic psychology.

Keen: In Freud's time there was a vast cultural conspiracy to repress the libido, to force it to remain unconscious. Would you say we have a parallel conspiracy to repress the religious impulse? We seem as ashamed of our appetite for meaning as Victorian society was of erections and palpitations not of the heart.

Assagioli: Many people seem to have voluntarily submitted to a spiritual lobotomy, to a repression of the sublime, a complete denial of the transpersonal self. Consequently the higher unconscious remains virtually unknown to many people. Much psychology has encouraged the adoption of a degraded self-image by advancing the argument that all religious or spiritual impulses are mere sublimations of sexual instincts. This type of reductionism ignores the fact that many of the most creative people in human history report experiences of a transpersonal nature. By what right can we deny that spiritual drives are less real, basic or fundamental than sexual or aggressive drives?

Keen: Why should people repress the sublime? What's so threatening about paradise?

Assagioli: It is no more mysterious than the repression of sexual ecstasy. We fear the sublime because it is unknown and because if we admit the reality of higher values we are committed to act in a more noble way. Goodness, cooperation, the loss of self-centeredness, and responsibility for spiritual growth go along with acknowledgment of the higher self.

Keen: What is the nature of the transpersonal self? Are you talking about an entity separate from the self we experience directly in self-awareness?

Assagioli: My dear friend, I cannot tell you what the transpersonal self is like. Maslow tried to characterize it and the nature of the peak experience in *The Psychology of Being*. Direct experience of the

transpersonal self is rare and union with it is very rare. But many people have a knowledge of it that is mediated through the higher unconsciousness, or the superconsciousness. I can describe some of the effects. It is spontaneously manifested in the creative works of the great universal geniuses such as Plato, Dante and Einstein. Others get in touch with it through prayer or meditation. Or they may feel a call or pull from some Higher Power. Language is always inadequate to speak about transpersonal or spiritual experiences. Every expression is highly symbolic, and a large variety of symbols have been used: enlightenment, descent into the underworld of the psyche, awakening, purification, transmutation, psychospiritual alchemy, rebirth and liberation.

Keen: I assume you have techniques in psychosynthesis to develop awareness of the transpersonal self.

Assagioli: Yes. Among them the technique of inner dialogue works well. Imagine a very wise person who knows the answers to all the problems you face. If you could obtain an interview with this person what would she tell you? This is your inner teacher . . . *

If you listen for an answer you may find it coming spontaneously through a third person or a book you are reading or through the development of circumstances. The practice of meditation also is good. Sometimes I suggest that clients write a letter.

Keen: To the transpersonal self?

Assagioli: Yes. "Dear Transpersonal Self..." Try it and see what happens.

Keen: To what address do I mail it?

Assagioli: To the same place you mail the angry letters when you tell a lover or enemy all the things you hate about him.

Keen: I can never quite decide whether psychosynthesis techniques are naive or brilliant. They frequently seem a little simpleminded to me. (Should I admit that after yesterday's session and his "simplistic" analysis of neurosis as vacillating in the decision seat, I stopped smoking cigarettes for happily-ever-after.) There is an old tradition that links wisdom and foolishness. Is a wise man simpleminded? Is the simplification that comes with age wisdom or fatigue? And is psychosynthesis a modern version of a wisdom school? What is the difference between a wise man and a fool?

Assagioli: Wisdom is even more out of fashion today than will. The original notion of wisdom has little to do with foolishness. Of course wisdom does involve a higher simplicity of the spirit, but this is not simplemindedness. In Chinese the ideograph for wisdom is a combination of wind and lightning. So the wise man is not the one who is serene and tired but one who can no more be captured than the wind and who strikes like lightning when necessary. Wisdom is connected with intuition, (that is why she has been seen as a woman—Sophia) and with seeing things whole, and so it links up with the transpersonal perspective. It is the power to play with opposites and to establish a synthesis. I suppose that age helps one to acquire some of the perspective necessary to create harmony among the apparent contradictions.

Keen: William Blake said: "The way of excess leads to the palace of wisdom." Shouldn't youth be a time of excess rather than striving for a premature balance?

Assagioli: That's amusing.

Keen: Here is another quote [from the Scottish philosopher McNab, I think] that goes with it: "Wisdom is a virtue in the second half of life but a bore in the first." Shouldn't psychosynthesis be

reserved for those over 40?

Assagioli: You will excuse my not giving you a wholesale answer. Individuals differ. Some young people are psychologically mature and some adults are childish psychologically. Some personal psychosynthesis must take place before the transpersonal psychosynthesis, but people are ready for this at different ages.

Keen: What are the limits of psychosynthesis? If you were a critic of your own system, what would you criticize?

Assagioli: That should be your job, but I will do it. It is fun. I will answer paradoxically. The limit of psychosynthesis is that it has no limits. It is too extensive, too comprehensive. Its weakness is that it accepts too much. It sees too many sides at the same time and that is a drawback.

Keen: (That's my "self-knowledge index" question. Most "famous" people get about C-. I give Assagioli a straight A. He sees in the back of his own eyes.)

Keen: Hannah Arendt says that forgiveness is the key to action and freedom. Without forgiveness life is governed by the repetition compulsion, by an endless cycle of resentment and retaliation. Yet few psychotherapists tip their hats to it. Some, like Janov, seem to encourage resentment and anger against parents and society because they are the source of primal pain. Tell me what psychosynthesis has to say about forgiveness, responsibility and gratitude.

Assagioli: In psychosynthesis we stress individual responsibility. No matter what has happened to a person he must assume responsibility here and now for changes he wants to make in his personality and not blame his parents or society . . . Toward those persons who have harmed you I recommend understanding and pity. Probably the harm is not so great as you imagine. Of course we are conditioned by the past but we have the power to disown it, to walk away, to change ourselves. Most of the harm parents do to children is done out of ignorance and not malice and so it is liberating to forgive those who knew no better, rather than harbor resentment and self-pity. Also forgiveness becomes easier when you come in contact with the real suffering of humanity. One thing I would propose in education is that young people have a weekly visit to hospitals, institutions for the insane and slums so they come directly into contact with human suffering without the interposition of theories, statistics, or political ideologies.

Keen: Since the decline of religion in the West and the loss of the rites of passage—birth and death rituals—it has fallen to psychology to help people cope with transition crises and boundary situations. How do you deal with death? At 85 how does it appear to you?

Assagioli: Death looks to me primarily like a vacation There are many hypotheses about death and the idea of reincarnation seems the most sensible to me. I have no direct knowledge about reincarnation but my belief puts me in good company with hundreds of millions of Eastern people, with the Buddha and many others in the West. Death is a normal part of a biological cycle. It is my body that dies and not all of me. So I don't care much. I may die this evening but I would willingly accept a few more years in order to do the work I am interested in, which I think may be useful to others. I am, as the French say, disponible (available). Also humor helps, and a sense of proportion. I am one individual on a small planet in a little solar system in one of the galaxies.

Three short AIS video suggestions (endure the short advertisements; then use "full screen" to watch to the end): [1] Carl Sagan's "[Pale Blue Dot](#)"; [2] "[A hundred million stars in three minutes](#)"; and [3] "[Limits of human exploration](#)." These three visual experiences make Assagioli's point.

Keen: (It is hard to know what counts as evidence for the validity of a world view and the therapeutic it entails. Every form of therapy has dramatic successes and just as dramatic failures. Enter as evidence in the case for psychosynthesis an ad hominem argument: in speaking about death there was no change in the tone or intensity of Assagioli's voice and the light still played in his dark eyes, and his mouth was never very far from a smile.)

Roberto Assagioli died August 23, being old and full of days.

Excerpts from Psychology Today, December 1974. Psychology Today consulting editor **Sam Keen holds a master's degree in theology from Harvard Divinity School and a Ph.D. in philosophy and philosophy of religion from Princeton.*